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ABSTRACT

The problems encountered in kindergarten in the eastern and western parts of the reunited Germany differ enormously. In the east, kindergartens and day care facilities are being closed for economic reasons; in the west, there is a lack of kindergartens and care facilities. There is a great deal of public interest in, and political controversy about, child care. Parents are calling for more child care facilities and higher standards of care. Parental involvement in the education of kindergarten children is common and was addressed in laws passed in the 1970s. Parent education programs are commonly conducted by kindergartens. Recent surveys have indicated that parents would like kindergartens to serve as centers where they can receive support from, and interact with, other parents. The Children and Youth Welfare Act calls for kindergartens to support and advise parents, and to assist in the creation of adequate living conditions for parents and children through such activities as advocating for families. A present problem is the insufficient number of kindergarten teachers. German kindergartens strive to play a role in their community by improving their services and looking for new ways to meet the needs of families. (BC)

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KINDERGARTENS OPEN

KINDERGARTENS, A COMMUNITY-CENTER FOR PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Paper prepared on behalf of the German National Committee for Early Childhood Education and Care and presented at the 20th World Congress of OMEP
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1. In the last 40 years entirely different polical, economical and social developments have taken place in the former Federal Repubic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). And two completely different childcare traditions had been built up in West-Germany and East-Germany. The main task of the present process of national reunification - which started on 3rd October 1990 - is to cope with these problems unc to find suitable solutions which fit in with the current and future necessities and demands of society in a unified country.
   The current problems encountered in the kindergarten sector in the eastern and western part of the country vary enormously from each other. While the western federal states suffer from a distinct lack of day-nurseries, kindergartens and day homes for children, many of these facilities for children are beeing closed in the eastern federal states due to the deteriorating economic situation . (In the times of the GDR, there was an almost 100% demand coverage for child attendance facilities, comprehensive state-run.)

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There are also great differences regarding to aims, content and methods of preschool education and care. (1) Kindergartenteachers in the eastern part currently are undergoing a considerable reorientation.
The following remarks on opening of kindergartens above all relate to experiences made in the western federal states.

2. The child care situation in the western part of Germany is at the center of attention of public interest and political controversy for a long time. The change of living conditions of children and families has not yet led to corresponding consequences on the part of youth services. (2)
The offer of (creches) day-nurseries, kindergartens and day care for children after school by no means meets the demand. There is a huge lack of places available in public childcare facilities: 600 000 children can't find a place.
The guarantee for a kindergarten place for every child wasn't adopted in a new Children and Youth Welfare Act (3) effective since January,1st. 1991, for financial reasons. However, this guarantee most probably will be introduced in 1997. Expansion of day care facilities is planned as a supporting measure of a Law for pregnants and families in need (4) introduced by legislature just now.

3. Parents are not only calling for more child care facilities. They demand for more than sufficient places, they are looking for a higher standard of care. The traditional day-nurseries, kindergartens and day homes for school children with their pedagogical approach and opening hours fail to match with the needs and requirements of families, especially those with working mothers. (In the past decades decisive changes have taken place in the lives of families and especially in the lives of women.) (5)
The variety of family forms and individual situations requires a wide-ranged, flexible, familiy supplementing offer in residental areas. Parents expect support in their efforts to combine familiy and professional career. The kindergartens

are requested to feature an early morning and late afternoon shift and offer the children a warm meal at noontime. They are supposed to feel responsible for all children living in the neighbourhood, including those socially, physically or mentally handicapped, and also for children at risk. They are supposed to feel responsible for all children in the neighbourhood regardless from age and required time of care. Kindergartens are supposed to be a broad sphere of experiences outside the family, where children can make experiences they otherwise might not be able to make.
On the other hand parents want to get into contact with other parents via the kindergartens. They expect kindergarten teachers to provide such offers. A number of kindergartens are working towards developing this kind of provision. Being aware of the living circumstances of families more and more becomes an important part of the pedagogical work in general. A model currently being tested all over the Federal Republic of Germany will provide more information on the vision, that it would be an appropriate further developement fo the existing kindergartens to become open neighbourhood-centers. (6)

4. In general, working with parents is beeing very popular in german kindergartens since a very long time. The finding that isolated promction of children apart from parental guidance is not very sensible, is something already determined by Fröbel. At his time he spoke of (in german) "Einigung". The correct english professional terminus is perhaps an "agreement" or "committment" between family and institution.
Nowadays everybody is aware of the fact that children's welfare is dependent on that of their parents.
Parents involvement is legally embodied in the kindergarten-laws passed by the federal states in the 1970's. The cooperation and participation of parents in organizational, staff--related and educational oriented matters is organized in specific committees, called parents' councils. It is within their scope of responsibilities for instance to define the opening hours of the facilities in cooperation with the body

responsible for kindergarten and the local youth welfare office. Parents' councils may also take the initiative for organizing parties, excursions and other forms of parential involvement. They frequently organize help by parents for necessary renovations as well as for design and furnishment of kindergartens and playgrounds. It's their objective to support the kindergarten, to awake the interest of all parents for kindergarten activities, and to intensify contacts between parents and kindergarten through their work.

5. Kindergartens are being engaged in various forms of parential involvement since many years. "Parent education" is an important element of this. Different topics, such as "resonsible use of TV", "enrollement in school" and "behavioral pecularities" are discussed in parent-teacher-meetings. These meetings are designed to advance parents knowledge about education .

   As mothers in Germany above all are responsible for upbringing of children, the major share of these offers usually is disigned for them. However, only a very small percentage is interested in this kind of offer.

   That's why many kindergartens are being engaged in a different kind of parental work since several years. A number of methods serve to make kindergartens-work transparent and to assist parents in child education. It all starts with extensive interviews at the time of enrollement. Later on mothers are welcome to sit in and have a look at everyday kindergarten life. In some kindergartens mothers occasionally help and make suggestions themselves for educational activities. Short informal talks in passing-by or in the parent-teacher corner in the entrance of kindergarten take place whenever parents want it. Some kindergartens organize social evenings, handicraft meetings, and parent-children play groups. Festivities as christmas basars, summer parties and carneval shows, which are prepared jointly with the parents, help to getting know one another. Kindergarten- newsletters and a notice-board in

the entrance hall continuously inform about interesting kindergarten news and occurences.
All offers for parent cooperation must carefully be harmonized with the families specific situation. The large variety of family lifestyles requires a large and balanced range of offers.

6. Recent surveys show that parents even more than previously would like to use the kindergarten as communication and contact center. They seek relief, support and sociable exchange of experiences. By sharing mutual experiences they can learn from one another and support each other.
Many kindergartens therefore offer mothers' meetings incl. child care in the afternoon. There are project groups and courses being conducted by the parents themselves. Some kindergartens initiate baby-sitting, or develop a rota for bringing and picking up the children in special services. They support the foundation of self help groups and other parent initiatives. They organize toy exhibitions, flea-markets and second-hand basars for children's clothing. Others organize hiking tours on saturdays, barbeques and some even give parents the key of the kindergarten on weekends to celebrate birthday parties and familiy get-togethers.
More and more kindergartens are working for serving the families in a way to help them to get into touch with self-help groups outside kindergartens or to build up new independant social networks.

7. The new Children and Youth Welfare Act calls for kindergartens not only to support and advise parents, but also to create and maintain together with them living conditions agreable to children and families. This implies professional public committment for improvement of opportunities for children. The kindergarten professional staff together with parents are supposed to fight for better children and family--related policies. Kindergartens could perhaps become meeting-places where parents can inform themselves about their

interests, where they can discuss their problems, develop strategies for better policy for children in their local area and determine how to proceed.
The kindergarten alone cannot meet the entire range of demands, but can refer to other institutions and forms of help and mediate these to families. The process of "opening to the communitiy" implies that kindergarten teachers will have to look for other effective partners in addition to the parents in their struggle for improvement.
For this reason kindergartens will - much more intensive than in former times - cooperate with local Youth Welfare Offices, centers for parents, advisory services and other social, educational and cultural services which are involved in the improvement of childrens' living conditions.
At present in Germany it seems to be an historic objective of kindergartens to act as advocates for childrens' interests to be considered by society and to "re-accustom" society to its youngest members.

8. Presently there is a large gap between the demand on kindergarten-teachers and the possibility for the demands to be met. The number of staff is too low and the conditions of work definitely open for improvement. There are usually 25 children and 1 - 2 educators in each group. The educators work a total of 38.5 hours weekly. 30 of these are spent directly with the children. The remaining time is invested in preparation tasks. Interviews with parents and all other activities carried out jointly with parents and colleagues must be managed in this preparatory phase. In order to commit capacities as econommically as possible, an increasing number of kindergartens has begun to survey parents on their special expectations.
Good cooperation between parents and institutions as well as equal partnership is in the interest of all those participating. A lot of kindergartens have already gathered good experiences in corresponding with the tasks. They try to shape their offer, to achieve a lokal identity and play a

more important role on the communitiy by improving their offer and looking for new ways to meed the needs of families. This process has'nt yet ccme to an end.

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